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Luck of the Irish

Donovan Tells How He Does It

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NEW YORK, April 15 (UPI) — James B. Donovan, the American intermediary in the prisoner exchange in Cuba, has lost a losing two things recently — sleep and money.

The Brooklyn lawyer who negotiated the release of 115 Bay of Pigs prisoners, or more recently the American skin divers, told in an interview today about the physical and mental strain of negotiating with Fidel Castro:

"They work at night down there," he said. "One night I got three hours' sleep, another time two hours and a third night none at all. Once Castro phoned me at 2 o'clock in the morning and announced we were going fishing at 6 o'clock. We did, too."

Lawyers estimate Mr. Donovan has lost \$100,000 in legal fees because of his work in rescuing prisoners in Cuba. He serves as counsel for the Cuban Families Committee without pay. No, that he is about to become a partner because he is a member of a well-known firm that has 13 lawyers on its staff.

How does he establish contact with Castro and go about getting into Cuba?

"Well," he said, "I'll tell you about one weekend. On Friday, March 15, I was in Federal court here. When I want to go to Cuba, I make a phone call to Havana to a person who is a sort of intermediary down there. I had put in a call and Friday afternoon I got word that clearance had come thru."

He was carry one bag containing tropical clothing and took a bus from the airport through a restricted area of the Cuban airport and got in touch with Pan American which provides a small plane which flew him to the island.

He had to wait until 10 p.m. before he could get into the country. He was pretty fast this time and so took off for Havana.

"Seven men, well-armed and wearing black balaclavas met me at Havana. I didn't have to show my visa or a passport or anything. I guess anybody is pretty well known by now. Three of the men got into an auto with me and we drove right into another car and we drove to one of the four houses maintained by the Cuban Ministry of External Affairs. Everything was ready for me there and I put in a call for Castro."

"Sometimes I get to see Castro right away and sometimes there is a delay of hours. I started talking with him on Saturday and continued thru on Sunday, March 17.

Saturday he took me for an auto ride and we kept negotiating. He is always very courteous and correct and he gave me a good lunch of fruit cup, chicken soup, red snapper salad and coffee. Also an excellent cigar.

"By Sunday I could sense that the negotiations weren't getting very far, so I decided to try the luck of the Irish. I said to Castro, 'Look, do you know what day this is? This is Saint Patrick's Day and Saint Patrick is my patron saint. They are painting a green line down Fifth Avenue in New York and getting ready to have a parade.'

"Do you know who one of the big heroes of South America is?" Bernard O'Higgins is his name. It's bad luck to do anything to an Irishman on Saint Patrick's Day and what's more you have two American women in prison so one of them is named O'Neill."

Mr. Donovan returned and said he spent the night in a hotel, leaving the two women, Geraldine Schamra and Martha O'Neill.

They came out of jail wearing their denim prison clothes and Mr. Donovan flew back to Miami with them on Sunday.

"Monday morning" Mr. Donovan said, "I was back in Federal Court and the Judge looked at me surprised and asked, 'Well, where have you been and what's new?'

What keeps driving him on missions that seem stranger to his heart than that of sacrifice? He doesn't want that for a while, then said:

"Well, you're at the Havana airport standing beside the steps as the prisoners get on the plane. There is fear on their faces but they are white with personal valor."

"After the auto takes off, they begin to relax. Sometimes when they see the coast of Florida they smile. Those smiles are not enough for me."